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THE TASK OF THE FUEL ADMINISTRATION¹

HARRY A. GARFIELD

United States Fuel Administrator

SOME of the fundamental facts with which those engaged in the Fuel Administration are called upon to deal are not generally known. If we go back twenty years, that is, until about the time of the Spanish-American War, we find that the total production of coal in the United States, anthracite and bituminous, was a little over two hundred millions of net tons in the year. At the close of this year we shall have produced something like six hundred and thirty millions of tons, anthracite and bituminous. In twenty years we have trebled our coal output. Five years after 1897 we were producing three hundred millions of tons; in another four years we were producing four hundred million tons; in another four years we were producing five hundred million tons; and now, this year, we are considerably exceeding six hundred million tons.

Why then is there any lack, if coal is so abundant, if as would appear from the very statement of the figures, the production of coal has outrun the increase in population? The answer is that the industrial life of the country has required this larger production. The amount exported has not contributed materially to our shortage. We produce from five to eight per cent for export. The percentage varies with the year, but is fairly constant. Coal is one of the commodities that we use at home and do not export to any large extent. The largest amount of coal exported goes to Canada; and yet in this year, when we have sent to Canada more coal than ever before, the amount will be insignificant. Italy is our next largest user, but to Italy we send only three or four million tons. To Cuba we send some, but only a million or two.

Let me give a few additional figures of consumption. The steam coal used by the railroads and the industrial enterprises, great and small, makes up, perhaps, seventy per cent of the total. Twenty-four per cent of our annual production of bituminous coal is used by the railroads, something like sixteen per cent for

¹ Introductory address as presiding officer at the evening meeting of the Academy of Political Science, December 14, 1917.

domestic purposes. Of the anthracite, about seventy-five per cent is used for domestic purposes. The present shortage of coal cannot be explained by consumption for domestic purposes any more than by export, and we thus come back to my original statement; we are short of coal because of the vast expansion of our industrial enterprises, an expansion which, as we all know without resorting to figures, has been vastly increased since the beginning of the war.

But we cannot account for it all in that way. There are other elements which we must have in mind. Large industrial enterprises, exercising proper precaution, early in the year began to accumulate coal. There are huge piles of reserve coal over the country. Photographs have been taken of these piles. We have sought information from the owners as to the amounts contained; and it is not unusual for a great enterprise to have fifty thousand, one hundred thousand, one hundred and fifty thousand, and if we are correctly informed, several hundred thousand tons of coal in one or several great piles. Domestic consumers also in some cases have accumulated large stocks. There has been hoarding. Many have a goodly supply of coal on hand, but others are short. There is an unbalanced situation.

As to the actual supply of bituminous coal, last year more was produced than ever before; five hundred and two millions and a half of tons were produced: this year we shall have produced something over five hundred and fifty-two millions of tons, fifty million tons more than were produced last year.

This ten per cent growth is about a normal increase, regardless of the war, and as nearly as can be estimated we ought to have something like fifty million additional tons, to take care of the extra growth of our industries and the war demands.

We are actually producing today about one million eight hundred thousand tons per day, and we cannot meet our added needs by added production.

There is only one way in which we can do much toward making up this fifty millions of tons required for the enlarged industrial enterprises of the country, and that is by conserving our supplies. The Fuel Administration has called to its aid the best scientific and business brains in the country, and it will make recommendations for fuel saving that can be effected everywhere—in the house, in the boiler rooms of the smaller and the greater factories, in the locomotives and the steamboats.

Thus far I have not spoken of the greatest factor in the entire situation, that is to say, transportation. As fuel administrator I am not prepared to say to the people of New York that the difficulty they are experiencing is due to lack of transportation and not at all to any fault of ours. I am not trying to place blame upon the railroads. Out of a hundred freight cars, twelve are laden with coal for locomotives, and twenty-four to twenty-six with commercial coal. In other words, something like thirty-five per cent of all the freight of the country is coal. You will appreciate that with this enlarged coal production we are doing our part to overburden our transportation system. But the increase of coal freight has not kept pace with the increase in other freight. Though in normal years thirty-five cars out of every hundred are filled with coal, at present the proportion is much less. Coal has been taken out of the mines and put into cars and the cars have been moved off on the side tracks, and at that not enough cars have been furnished at the mines to take care of the production. During the last few weeks the allotment of cars has fallen to eleven, ten, even seven per cent of normal. Since the appointment of the fuel administrator in the latter part of August, car shortage has prevented operators in the bituminous regions alone from shipping out twenty millions of tons of coal. Those figures are furnished by the railroads, reporting to the Geological Survey of the Bureau of Mines. We have not had the full car supply, in part because cars are being used for other commodities.

But that is not all. The locomotive manufacturers of the United States have been sending most of the locomotives manufactured during the last few months to Russia and to France. Of several hundred locomotives completed within a given month recently, only eight or ten remained on this side of the water; the rest went abroad. The same thing is true of gondola cars. Further, on one of the large systems alone, forty locomotives lately came into the shops to be repaired, and there were not men in sufficient number to repair them. Here again was an impediment to the movement of cars. Our car supply is used up in carrying commodities other than coal; we are hampered by the shipping of cars and locomotives abroad, and we find ourselves in this emergency without adequate power to conduct coal transportation.

As if to add to the sum of difficulties, there is this further difficulty: The railroad systems of the United States have been built up as separate systems. There has been no adequate way of connecting the tracks. The Pennsylvania Railroad comes in at one place, the New York Central at another. The roads are not united as one great trackage system throughout the country. The cars and locomotives are separately owned; the train crews belong separately to different companies; the stocks and bonds are owned separately. The railroads have been making a herculean effort to combine their physical equipment, to make an exchange in the use of trackage, to send cars and locomotives from one road to another where the need is greater, but they began very late to do that. I am not complaining that they began late, I am merely stating the fact. There may have been very good reasons why they did not begin before they did. But the result is, as the railroad men tell us with regret, that the railroads of the country are not operated to maximum efficiency, and they are setting about to remedy that difficulty.

These are the big problems confronting the Fuel Administration. That administration is based upon what we may call our American system: the central power at Washington, the state representatives in each of the states, and local representatives in the counties and cities. If you wish to help in any way, even in the making of complaints, go to the representatives in your locality. Do not try to make a short cut to Washington. We will do our best to furnish the local representatives with the coal needed, and they will do their best to distribute it to you here. We had to have some kind of a working hypothesis to begin with, and we adopted that.

As I have said to everyone who has come to us in Washington, bringing the burden of the difficulties under which each is laboring, we are called upon to act, we are an executive arm of the government; therefore, we must act, act, act, and that means that we make mistakes. But I have not time to study the question overmuch and see whether mistakes are being made. I have surrounded myself with the most skilful men that I could bring to Washington, men familiar through a lifelong experience with the problems of the anthracite and bituminous fields, and we are laboring together to accomplish results in the face of almost insuperable difficulties. We are not afraid to make mistakes, and when we take an action one day and the next day discover it is

wrong, we are not afraid to say we were wrong, to take it back and start over. The state fuel administrators are giving us the benefit of the experience as each sees it in his own state or his own district; and the result of it is that out of the turmoil will come in the end an ordered system.

The great misfortune, of course, is that the bill before Congress became law at so late a day that it was necessary, so to speak, to build the house and live in it at the same time. Hence we have winter upon us, with our organization only just completed, with the coal only partially moved; therefore there is distress and apprehension. I can say only that the government at Washington—I do not mean the Fuel Administration alone, but all the departments of government—is alive to the necessities pressing upon us, and that there will be that kind of co-operation that will see us through, and which will bring out of the apparent chaotic condition at the outset something that will be ordered government, and that will solve, as far as it can be solved, this great question of fuel administration.